

It's Okay To Make Mistakes: Overcoming Perfectionism

Gifted and Talented

When you aim for perfection, you discover it's a moving target.
~Geoffrey F. Fisher

Almost Perfect...But Not Quite by Shel Silverstein

"Almost perfect... but not quite."
Those were the words of Mary Hume
At her seventh birthday party,
Looking 'round the ribboned room.

"This tablecloth is *pink* not *white*--
Almost perfect... but not quite."

"Almost perfect... but not quite."
Those were the words of grown-up Mary
Talking about her handsome beau,
The one she wasn't gonna marry.

"Squeezes me a bit too tight--
Almost perfect... but not quite."

"Almost perfect... but not quite."
Those were the words of ol' Miss Hume
Teaching in the seventh grade,
Grading papers in the gloom
Late at night up in her room.

"They never cross their t's just right--
Almost perfect... but not quite."

Ninety-eight the day she died
Complainin' 'bout the spotless floor.
People shook their heads and sighed,
"Guess that she'll like heaven more."

Up went her soul on feathered wings,
Out the door, up out of sight.

Another voice from heaven came--
"Almost perfect... but not quite."



What is Perfectionism?

“A disposition to regard anything short of perfection as unacceptable, especially: the setting of unrealistically demanding goals accompanied by a disposition to regard failure to achieve them as unacceptable and a sign of personal worthlessness.”

~ Miriam-Webster's Medical Desk Dictionary

How a Perfectionist Acts

- Overcommits himself
- Rarely delegates work to others
- Has a hard time making choices
- Always has to be in control
- Competes fiercely
- Arrives late because one more thing had to be done
- Always does last-minute cramming
- Gets carried away with the details
- Never seems satisfied with his work
- Constantly busies himself with something or other
- Frequently criticizes others
- Refuses to hear criticism of himself
- Pays more attention to negative than positive comments
- Checks up on other people's work
- Calls himself "stupid" when he does something imperfectly
- Procrastinates

What a Perfectionist Thinks

- ▣ If I can't do it perfectly, what's the point?
- ▣ I should excel at everything I do.
- ▣ I always have to stay ahead of others.
- ▣ I should finish a job before doing anything else.
- ▣ Every detail of a job should be perfect.
- ▣ Things should be done right the first time.
- ▣ There is only one right way to do things.
- ▣ I'm a wonderful person if I do well; I'm a lousy person if I do poorly.
- ▣ I'm never good enough.
- ▣ I'm stupid.
- ▣ I can't do anything right.
- ▣ I'm unlikable.
- ▣ I'd better not make a mistake here or people will think I'm not very...(smart, good, capable).
- ▣ If I goof up, something's wrong with me.
- ▣ People shouldn't criticize me.
- ▣ Everything should be clearly black or white. Grays are a sign of confused thinking.

How a Perfectionist Feels

- ▣ Deeply embarrassed about mistakes she makes
- ▣ Disgusted or angry with herself when she is criticized
- ▣ Anxious when stating her opinion to others
- ▣ Extremely worried about details
- ▣ Angry if her routine is interrupted
- ▣ Nervous when things around her are messy
- ▣ Fearful or anxious a lot of the time
- ▣ Exhausted and unable to relax
- ▣ Plagued by self-hatred
- ▣ Afraid of appearing stupid
- ▣ Afraid of appearing incompetent
- ▣ Afraid of being rejected
- ▣ Ashamed of having fears
- ▣ Discouraged
- ▣ Guilty about letting others down

Perfectionism is *Relational*

- ▣ Someone, in addition to you, is involved in creating it.
- ▣ There is an underlying fear that you won't be acceptable to someone if you don't do well enough.
- ▣ You're constantly trying to excel in order to win the approval and love of other people.

Kids might think they need to be perfect if the important adults in their lives:

- ▣ Criticize them a lot.
- ▣ Criticize others a lot.
- ▣ Do lots of things *for* them.
- ▣ Give them too much praise.
- ▣ Compare one child in the family to another.
- ▣ Don't say much at all about kids' behavior.
- ▣ Have very strict rules about how to behave.
- ▣ Are perfectionists.
- ▣ Say, "Yes, but" a lot.
- ▣ Have a home that doesn't feel safe or calm.

Other Things that Influence Perfectionism

Birth order



Media Messages



All-or-Nothing Culture



Peers



It's Not About Blame

- ▣ You can't overcome perfectionism by blaming someone for it.
- ▣ Your self-view is not who you ARE – it's just a way you learned to look at yourself
- ▣ Parents have their own self-view that influences their parenting style

Games Perfectionists Play

Perfectionists use a number of tricks and strategems, often unconsciously, to protect the picture they have of themselves.

- ▣ Riding the mood rollercoaster
- ▣ Focusing on the future
- ▣ The numbers game
- ▣ Pining over the past
- ▣ Putting your goals first
- ▣ Getting it right
- ▣ All-or-Nothing thinking
- ▣ Telescopic thinking



Downside of Perfectionism

- ❑ Avoid trying new things for fear of failure
- ❑ Procrastinate and leave work unfinished out of fear it won't be good enough
- ❑ Focus on mistakes, rather than on what they did well
- ❑ Set unrealistic goals and then condemn themselves when they don't achieve them



- ▣ Have trouble accepting criticism
- ▣ Find it hard to laugh at themselves
- ▣ Focus on end products, rather than on the process of learning
- ▣ Approach assignments with an inflexibility that insists on one “right” way to do or be



- ▣ Judge themselves severely when they get a grade below an “A”
- ▣ Lose their former enthusiasm for learning because of an obsession with what “good work” should look like
- ▣ Underachieve because of an inability to complete projects considered less than “perfect”



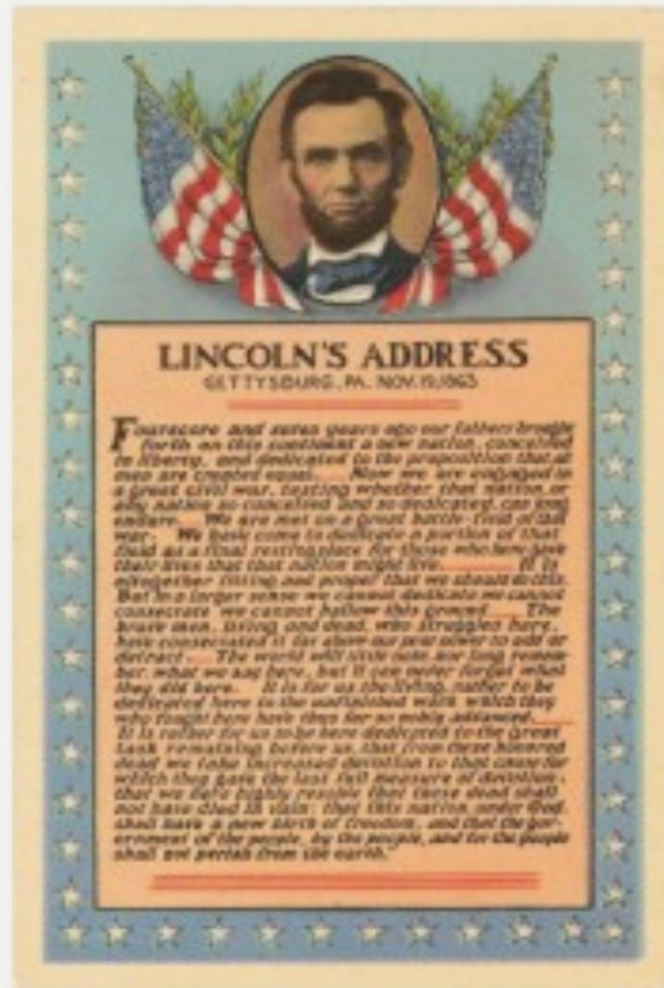
The Procrastination Trap

- ▣ Studies show that often perfectionism is at the core of procrastination.
- ▣ Procrastination acts as an insurance policy.
- ▣ Procrastination is a complex problem that leads to irrational behavior.



The Perfectionist Thinking of Abraham Lincoln

"The Gettysburg Address was "a flat failure."



The Perfectionist Thinking of Leonardo Da Vinci

"I have offended God and mankind because my work didn't reach the quality it should have."



The Perfectionist Thinking of Marie Curie

"I never see what has been done; I only see what remains to be done."



Perfectionism: Myths vs. Realities

MYTH

- ▣ “I wouldn’t be the success I am today if I weren’t such a perfectionist.



REALITY

- ▣ Perfectionism does not lead to success and fulfillment. Although some perfectionists are remarkably successful, what they fail to realize is that their success has been achieved despite—not because of—their compulsive striving.

Perfectionism: Myths vs. Realities

MYTH

- ▣ Perfectionists just have this enormous desire to please others and to be the very best they can.



REALITY

- ▣ Perfectionistic tendencies often begin as an attempt to win love, acceptance, and approval.

Perfectionism: Myths vs. Realities

MYTH

- ▣ Perfectionists get things done, and they do things right.

REALITIES

- ▣ Perfectionists often have problems with procrastination, missed deadlines, and low productivity.



Perfectionism: Myths vs. Realities

MYTH

- ▣ Perfectionists are determined to overcome all obstacles to success.



REALITY

- ▣ Although perfectionists follow an “I’ll keep trying until it’s perfect” credo, they are especially vulnerable to potentially serious difficulties such as depression, writer’s block, and performance and social anxiety.

Perfectionist vs. Healthy Striver

PERFECTIONIST

- ▣ Sets standards beyond reach and reason
- ▣ Is never satisfied by anything less than perfection
- ▣ Becomes dysfunctionally depressed when experiences failure and disappointment

HEALTHY STRIVER

- ▣ Sets high standards, but just beyond reach
- ▣ Enjoys process as well as outcome
- ▣ Bounces back from failure and disappointment quickly and with energy

Perfectionist vs. Healthy Striver

PERFECTIONIST

- ▣ Is preoccupied with fear of failure and disapproval – this can deplete energy levels
- ▣ Sees mistakes as evidence of unworthiness
- ▣ Becomes overly defensive when criticized

HEALTHY STRIVER

- ▣ Keeps normal anxiety and fear of failure and disapproval within bounds – uses them to create energy
- ▣ Sees mistakes as opportunities for growth and learning
- ▣ Reacts positively to helpful criticism

Perfectionist vs. Healthy Striver

PERFECTIONIST

- ▣ Avoids new experiences because you are terrified of making mistakes, especially in public
- ▣ Throws a fit because the editor of the school paper tampered with your work

HEALTHY STRIVER

- ▣ Willing to try new things, take risks, and learn from your experiences and your mistakes
- ▣ Reads the story you wrote for the school paper and notices that the editor improved your copy

Walt Disney's Rocky Start:

Walt once got fired by a newspaper editor because
“he had no good ideas.”



Michael Jordan Didn't Give Up

He didn't make the varsity basketball team as a sophomore in high school. Though he was embarrassed and disappointed, this gave him the impetus to work harder to make the team.



What if he had listened?

- ▣ Steve Jobs, founder of Apple, wasn't successful when he and Steve Wozniak tried to sell the rights to the personal computer they developed. A Hewlett-Packard executive told them, "We don't need you. You haven't got through college yet." The president of Atari said, "Get your feet off my desk, get out of here, you stink and we're not going to buy your product."



Load Lighteners: Strategies to Help Overcome Perfectionism

- ▣ Dive in
- ▣ Not “right”, just write
- ▣ Crack up
- ▣ Move it
- ▣ Imagine someone else did it
- ▣ Just say no
- ▣ Do something that can't be judged



Tips for Procrastinators

- ▣ Allow more time than you think a project will take.
- ▣ Set realistic goals but don't set them in stone.
- ▣ Break down big and intimidating projects into smaller, more manageable steps.
- ▣ Start something right now – instead of waiting until you feel thoroughly prepared.

- ▣ Make a conscious effort to realize that whatever the project is, it can't be perfect.
- ▣ Begin your day with your most difficult task or the one you enjoy least.
- ▣ Plan to have fun without feeling guilty.

- ▣ Keep a diary of your progress.
- ▣ Remove distractions from your workspace.
- ▣ Keep a list of backup projects – things you mean to do when you have time.

What Parents and Teachers Can Do

- ▣ Help kids to understand that they can feel satisfied when they feel they've done their best.
- ▣ Show children that you value them more for who they are as people than for what they can do.
- ▣ Praise moderately at least most of the time.
- ▣ Help them understand that mistakes are a normal part of learning.

- ▣ Help children learn to laugh at themselves and their own mistakes.
- ▣ Teach appropriate self-evaluation, and encourage children to learn to take criticism.
- ▣ Teach them how to criticize others sensitively and constructively.
- ▣ Read biographies which demonstrate how successful people experienced and learned from their failures.

- ▣ Share your own mistakes and model the lessons learned from mistakes.
- ▣ Teach children routines, habits, and organization, but help them understand that their habits should not be so rigid that they can't change them.
- ▣ Teach kids creative problem solving strategies and how to brainstorm for ideas that will keep their self-criticism from interfering with their productivity.

- ▣ Explain that there is more than one correct way to do almost everything.
- ▣ Help children separate themselves from their products, particularly their grades.
- ▣ Model healthy excellence: take pride in the quality of your work but don't hide your mistakes or be constantly self-critical.

- ▣ Reward trying not just results, especially when they take risks or overcome obstacles.
- ▣ Provide a structure that allows them to set realistic goals and create a plan of action.
- ▣ Involve them in activities that aren't graded or judged.
- ▣ Help them plan for new challenges: Talk to them about their concerns, what difficulties they might encounter, and what actions they can take, even in the "worst case scenario".

- ▣ Convey courage.
- ▣ Acknowledge learning.
- ▣ Expect progress not perfection.
- ▣ Applaud persistence.
- ▣ Honor time invested.
- ▣ Discover meaning and enjoyment.

When to Get Professional Help

Common Mental Disorders and How Perfectionism Might Relate to Them

- ▣ Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
- ▣ Anxiety and Panic Disorders
- ▣ Depression
- ▣ Addiction
- ▣ Eating Disorders
- ▣ Body Dysmorphic Disorder

Excellence is risk. Perfectionism is fear.

Excellence is effort. Perfectionism is anger and frustration.

Excellence is openness to being wrong. Perfectionism is having to be right.

Excellence is spontaneity. Perfectionism is control.

Excellence is flow. Perfectionism is pressure.

Excellence is confidence. Perfectionism is doubt.

Excellence is journey. Perfectionism is destination.

Excellence is acceptance. Perfectionism is judgment.

Excellence is encouraging. Perfectionism is criticizing.

~adapted from various anonymous sources

Books For Children

- ▣ *Be a Perfect Person in Just Three Days!* By Stephen Manes (elem.)
- ▣ *Here's to You, Rachel Robinson* by Judy Blume (middle/high)
- ▣ *On the Devil's Court* by Carl Deuker (middle/high)
- ▣ *Ordinary Jack* by Helen Cresswell (elem.)
- ▣ *Winners and Losers* by Stephen Hoffius (middle/high)
- ▣ *Mistakes that Worked* by Charlotte Jones and John Obrien (elem.)
- ▣ *Nobody's Perfect: A Story for Children About Perfectionism* by Ellen Flanagan Burns
- ▣ *Too Perfect* by Trudy Ludwig (elem.)
- ▣ *A Taste of Perfection* by Laura Langston (middle)
- ▣ *What to Do When Good Enough Isn't Good Enough: The Real Deal on Perfectionism* by Thomas S. Greenspon, Ph.D.

Resources

- ▣ *A Love For Learning: Motivation and the Gifted Child* by Carol Strip Whitney, Ph.D., with Gretchen Hirsch
- ▣ *Perfectionism: What's Bad About Being Too Good?* By Miriam Adderholdt, Ph.D. and Jan Goldberg
- ▣ *Free our Families from Perfectionism* by Thomas S. Greenspon, Ph.D.
- ▣ *Kids are worth it!* By Barbara Coloroso
- ▣ *The New Birth Order Book* by Kevin Leman, Ph.D.
- ▣ *What to Do When Good Enough Isn't Good Enough: The Real Deal on Perfectionism* by Thomas S. Greenspon, Ph.D.
- ▣ *When Gifted Kids Don't Have All the Answers* by Jim Delisle, Ph.D. and Judy Glabraith, M.A.
- ▣ www.nagc.org
- ▣ www.sengifted.org/articles_social/rimm_perfectionism.shtml
- ▣ www.sengifted.org
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- ▣ <http://cmhc.utexas.edu/booklets/perfection/perfect.html>
- ▣ www.sanchezclass.com/preventing-perfectionism.htm